

Building Life Skills as Primary Prevention for Youth

Research-based primary prevention promotes well-being for all young people and guards against factors that can develop into a crisis.

US youth are experiencing increased rates of sadness, hopelessness, and suicidality.¹ Research-based life skill-building is a component of primary prevention that builds protective factors and supports their well-being.

Access to primary prevention is a wise investment and helps ensure each young person gets support.

Prioritizing primary prevention can:

- Mitigate social and economic impacts on other health, legal, education, and workforce costs.²
- Reduce strain on the mental health workforce, which is especially important given current staff shortages and burnout.^{3,4} These shortages have made it untenable that every young person in need of mental health services will receive timely care from a professional.

Primary prevention includes helping all students develop essential life skills.

Research-based programs that help young people build personal and interpersonal life skills have been shown to reduce symptoms of externalizing problems, such as aggression and hyperactivity, as well as symptoms of internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression.^{5,6} Life skills also promote resilience and well-being and can lead to improved school success and college and career readiness.⁷ A majority of parents believe teaching these skills is very important, and that it has become even more important since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸

Life skills and primary prevention are important because:

- Building research-based life skills supports primary prevention for youth substance use, bullying, and child sexual abuse.^{9,10,11}
- Teaching personal and interpersonal life skills can also reduce hopelessness and anxiety, which in addition to youth substance use and child sexual abuse are risk factors for youth suicide.¹²

- Including trauma-informed prevention and supports in schools is especially important as young people cope with grief connected to the pandemic.¹³

What does primary prevention look like in the classroom?

- Teachers reinforce personal and interpersonal life skills that start in the home, such as learning how to solve problems, manage emotions, set goals, and get along with others.
- In the classroom, teachers typically explain an essential skills concept using words, pictures, or video. Students then practice the concept in a group discussion, through individual writing tasks, or by working together.
- Teachers review students' understanding of the skills and reinforce as needed.
- Teaching these skills will look different in each school based on the community it serves.

Continuum of Supports*

TIER III services allow for programs for students identified as experiencing mental health or substance use challenges that warrant individualized interventions.

TIER II services allow for early intervention to mitigate challenges and targeted support for students exhibiting risk factors.

TIER I supports and instructional practices are provided to all students through prevention-based strategies and activities that foster healthy functioning and generate a safe and supportive school climate.

*An effective prevention program can be woven into a tiered continuum of supports for all students. This continuum of supports, which is research-based and composed of three tiers, addresses a whole-school-driven, prevention-based framework that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for students' needs.

Policy Recommendations

- Include primary prevention in legislative language related to programs and services for young people.
 - Language should include research-based primary prevention to ensure that programs and services address a full continuum of support.
 - Terms and definitions for primary prevention programs and services should be consistent to improve clarity and connect initiatives.
- Coordinate efforts that address primary prevention across agencies to ensure they are not implemented in silos and can be leveraged for maximum impact and reach.
- To the extent possible, streamline funding and promote cross-agency collaboration to help schools and communities.
- Adequately fund research-based primary prevention programs and services.

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